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Review of travel and related entitlements for staff members of the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General

INTRODUCTION

1. The General Assembly, in its decision 46/450 of 20 December 1991, endorsed the comments and observations of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on the report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/46/3/Add.2) on standards of accommodation for air travel. The Advisory Committee had stated in its report (A/46/748) of 5 December 1991 that a study of the issue of travel standards should be conducted which "should take into account practices elsewhere in the United Nations system with a view to achieving uniformity and consistency". The General Assembly in the decision mentioned above requested the Secretary-General to submit to it, at its forty-seventh session, "a review/evaluation of the current system together with the specific proposals".

2. In response to that request, the Secretary-General submitted a report to the General Assembly at its forty-seventh session entitled "Review of travel and related entitlements for members of organs and subsidiary organs and staff members of the United Nations" (A/C.5/47/61). That report dealt primarily with questions related to travel and related entitlements for members of organs and subsidiary organs. The Secretary-General stated in the report that efforts were under way to have the issue of travel standards for staff members considered on an inter-agency basis through placing it on the agenda of the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (Personnel and General Administrative Questions), and that he therefore considered it advisable to postpone to the forty-eighth session of the Assembly the submission of recommendations with regard to travel of staff members of the United Nations.

3. As a result, the General Assembly decided, in its decision 47/460 of 23 December 1992, to defer consideration of the report of the Secretary-General dealing with travel of members of organs and subsidiary organs until it would also have before it his report on travel of staff members of the United Nations.

4. In addition to its earlier requests outlined above, the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session requested the Secretary-General "to submit proposals to the General Assembly at its current session on the provision of and related arrangements for travel services and allowances, with a view to making more effective use of resources, taking into account the practices of Member States" (resolution 48/228 of 23 December 1993, sect. II, para. 3).

I. CURRENT PROVISIONS AND RULES GOVERNING THE STANDARDS OF ACCOMMODATION FOR AIR TRAVEL BY STAFF MEMBERS OF THE UNITED NATIONS

5. The standards of accommodation for travel of staff members of the United Nations have undergone numerous changes since 1958, when transportation by air was established as the standard mode of travel. The extent, nature and timing of these changes is outlined in an overview of the evolution of the rules governing these standards contained in annex I of the present report.

6. Travel of staff members of the United Nations and of persons travelling on its behalf, other than members of organs and subsidiary organs, is governed by the provisions contained in administrative instruction ST/AI/249/Rev.3, which are summarized below.

7. The basic standard of accommodation for air travel is economy class at the least costly airfare structure regularly available. Higher standards may apply depending upon the rank of the traveller, the duration of the trip and the purpose of the travel.

8. Under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general and, where applicable, their eligible family members are provided with travel accommodation "in the class immediately below first class for travel on official business, on appointment, transfer or separation, for home-leave and family-visit travel, irrespective of the duration of a particular flight".

9. Staff members below the assistant secretary-general level are provided with transportation "at the least costly airfare structure regularly available or its equivalent". Only for flights exceeding a duration of nine hours is accommodation provided "in the class immediately below first class for travel on official business". Home-leave travel, family-visit travel and travel on education grant for this group of staff members and their eligible family members is provided at the least costly airfare structure irrespective of the duration of a particular flight.

10. For group travel on missions or to conferences, special fare arrangements at a class of service lower than those set out in paragraphs 8 and 9 above may be made by the Organization.

II. COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF STANDARDS OF ACCOMMODATION FOR TRAVEL BY AIR

11. Pursuant to the various decisions and recommendations of the General Assembly and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the Secretariat undertook to study first the travel standards and practices within the United Nations system. As an initial step towards achievement of the uniformity and consistency called for by the Advisory Committee, a comprehensive questionnaire was sent out in July 1992 to 16 specialized agencies and organizations within the United Nations system.

12. It was also decided, at that time, to send a similar questionnaire to each permanent mission to the United Nations as well as to 15 intergovernmental organizations outside the United Nations system.

13. All but one of the specialized agencies and all of the intergovernmental organizations responded to the questionnaire. Sixty-two (about 30 per cent) of the permanent missions responded.

A. Review of travel standards of Member States

14. Further to the questionnaires sent to permanent missions in connection with the general review of travel standards requested at the forty-sixth session of the General Assembly, the Secretariat, pursuant to Assembly resolution 48/228, requested a selection of 22 Member States to provide the United Nations with "the most recent version of the rules and regulations containing the policy for air travel appropriate to all levels of staff within the foreign ministry of its country's Government". In light of the short period between this most recent request made by the General Assembly (23 December 1993) and the expected start of the resumed forty-eighth session, it was decided to limit the request to a representative selection of Member States comprised of the membership of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, as well as the chairmen of the regional groups.

15. Only three permanent missions responded to the latest request in time to be considered for the present report, and reliable conclusions, therefore, cannot be drawn from this recent survey. For information purposes only, the responses are summarized in annex V of the present report.

16. A consolidation of the responses of some 60 Member States to the earlier questionnaire proved extremely difficult. The differences in ranks and grades of travellers and in the terminology used in the responses of various Member States made a consistent comparison amongst each other and to the ranks and resulting rules of travel applicable to the United Nations almost impossible. For the same reasons, a comparison of data provided by intergovernmental organizations outside the United Nations system with those of the United Nations was equally problematic. Complicating factors were the lack of clarity in describing applicable standards and the diversity of organizational units authorized to approve exceptions.

17. Bearing in mind the limitations set out in the above paragraphs, the summary of responses from the 62 permanent missions contained in annex IV to the present report can only be interpreted with great difficulty. It can be stated that the standards of accommodation accorded to government officials vary greatly among the Member States. Some provide first-class accommodation to senior officials and business class to officials at other levels, while others provide first-class accommodation to their senior-level officials and economy class to the remaining travellers. Other Member States stated that they make no distinction on the basis of grade, level or rank of the traveller in setting travel standards.

18. The level of officials considered as "senior officials" by individual Member States is very difficult to determine from the responses. Some stated that this category included cabinet ministers and, in two cases, even the presidents of Member States. Others include officials at considerably lower ranks in the category of "senior officials". Others, again, did not specify the official considered to be "senior". Furthermore, several Member States indicated that one single standard of accommodation for air travel was applicable to all government officials, irrespective of the position or grade level of the traveller. These Member States did not specify the extent and scope of exceptions applied to this standard, therefore making a comparison of applicable standards of accommodation amongst Member States extremely unreliable.

19. There is no clear trend among the respondents as regards the role which the duration of the flights plays in determining the authorized class of service. Some Member States do not take into consideration the duration of the travel, while others do. Among the latter category there is a wide difference in the number of hours which justify a higher standard of accommodation. One Member State applies the nine-hour rule currently used at the United Nations; all but one of the others use shorter durations to justify a higher standard of accommodation.

20. Beyond the summaries contained in the preceding paragraphs and in annexes IV and V, the limited response to this questionnaire does not provide sufficient data for a comprehensive review of travel standards "taking into account the practices of Member States".

B. Review of travel standards within the United Nations system

21. As a result of the responses from agencies and organizations within the United Nations system to the initial questionnaire sent out in 1992 following the request of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session, the available information is extensive and detailed. Considering the similarity in structure and nomenclature of the organizations involved, the data on travel standards are relatively easy to interpret, making it possible to present a reliable report on the standards of accommodation for air travel currently applied within the United Nations system. The present section of the report is based on information from the 15 organizations that replied, of the 16 surveyed.

22. Although the absence of a common policy is apparent, it is possible to discern certain similarities in the standards of accommodation used in the organizations surveyed. Most of them accord a higher standard of accommodation to their senior officials (equivalent to under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general in the United Nations). Only 3 out of the 15 organizations provide all staff members with the same standard of accommodation regardless of grade level or position. Almost all organizations follow the practice of the United Nations to accord a special standard of accommodation to the head of the organization.

23. The standard of accommodation for air travel authorized for officials at the highest levels varies greatly among the organizations. Some organizations provide first-class accommodation; some provide business class regardless of the duration of the flight. Other organizations will provide either first, business or economy class but base the class of service in all instances on the duration of a particular flight. Details of the specific standards provided to the officials at the highest levels by each organization are contained in annex II of the present report.

24. The standards of accommodation for air travel undertaken by staff members at the director level (D-2) and below also vary greatly among the 15 organizations. However, all but three organizations have established entitlements which are based on the duration of a particular flight. There is a wide disparity within the United Nations system with regard to the particular flight duration which entitles the traveller to a higher class of service. The durations range from two and a half hours to nine hours. Details of the standard of accommodation accorded by the 15 organizations to staff at the D-2 level and below are given in annex III of the present report.

25. Eleven of the 15 organizations require staff members at the D-2 level and below to fly at a lower standard of accommodation when the travel is undertaken for the purpose of home leave or family visit. The lower standard is expressed either as economy class or as "the least costly airfare structure regularly available". The remaining four organizations provide the same standards of accommodation for home-leave and family-visit travel as for other categories of travel. Two of the above organizations have adopted a system of options which permits the staff member to select one of three different frequencies of home leave (every year, every second year or every third year) with a higher standard of accommodation provided to staff members who opt to wait for longer periods of time between home-leave travel.

26. In paragraph 5 of the report of the Secretary-General to the forty-seventh session of the General Assembly (A/C.5/47/61) it was indicated that efforts were under way to have the issue of travel standards considered on an inter-agency basis through placing it on the agenda of the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (Personnel and General Administrative Questions) with a view to achieving the conformity and consistency in air-travel standards requested by the Assembly.

27. Beginning in September 1993, the Consultative Committee collected and disseminated amongst its member organizations detailed information about the

standards of accommodation for air travel currently applicable within each organization.

C. Conclusions

28. A review of the standards of accommodation for air travel shows that the standards applicable to staff members of the United Nations tend to be lower than those accorded to officials of comparable rank in other organizations within the United Nations system. This is particularly the case with regard to the standards of accommodation provided to staff members at the D-2 level and below. United Nations staff members at these levels are authorized to travel at a standard of accommodation lower than that accorded to similar staff in 11 out of 15 other organizations surveyed. The remaining four organizations apply standards of accommodation equivalent to those of the United Nations. The level of accommodation for air travel for this category of staff is the lowest standard within the United Nations system.

29. A comparison of the standards of accommodation accorded to officials at the higher levels by the organizations of the United Nations system shows similar results for the United Nations. Ten of the organizations surveyed provide their higher-level officials with standards of accommodation superior to those given to similar officials in the United Nations. Three organizations provide standards of accommodation similar to the United Nations and two organizations provide a standard marginally lower than that of the United Nations.

30. As detailed above, a comparison of the standards of accommodation applicable to officials of Member States to that of United Nations staff members is more difficult to undertake. The level, rank, authorized class of service and duration of flights vary so greatly among the Member States who responded to the requests for information by the Secretariat that a uniform statement comparing the two groups is unattainable. However, in general it appears that Member States tend to accord a higher standard of accommodation to their officials at the higher levels than the United Nations. Middle-level officials tend to have a similar standard and officials at a lower level tend to travel at a standard of accommodation lower than that prevailing within the United Nations system or in other international organizations. The Secretariat also noted a prevalent practice by national airlines of Member States to upgrade officials of their countries routinely to a higher class of service than that authorized by the official standards of accommodation.

III. IMPACT OF POSSIBLE CHANGES IN THE CURRENT STANDARD OF ACCOMMODATION

31. In line with the requests of the General Assembly and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions for a harmonization of the standards of accommodation system-wide and their requests for proposals on the provision of travel services with a view to making more effective use of resources, taking into account the practices of Member States, the Secretariat studied the financial impact of a possible change in the duration of flights which would allow for the authorization of a different class of service.

32. Prior to the most recent request of the General Assembly, the Secretariat at Headquarters kept statistical records on the flying time to different destinations and the authorized class of service. Records were also kept on the travel cost in the event of a change in the minimum flying time which determines a higher class of service. The data gathered by the Secretariat for world-wide travel authorized from Headquarters showed that the financial impact of decreasing or increasing the determination point for higher class of service would be minimal (less than 5 per cent for an increase or a decrease by one hour, less than 10 per cent for an increase or decrease by four hours).

33. Even if economy class were the prevailing standard for all flights, an analysis of the travel patterns of United Nations travellers shows that their itineraries would only allow a minimal use of discounted economy airfares which are a prerequisite for significant savings. Most official travel consists of multi-leg itineraries to a variety of destinations. The airfares for such trips are constructed based on the combination of one-way full economy-class fares which are only marginally less costly than business-class fares. Under the current standards of accommodation, a significant amount of United Nations travel to destinations where simple round-trip tickets can be utilized already falls into the category of the least costly airfare structure (such as transatlantic travel). The United Nations is normally able to utilize excursion and advanced-purchase airfares at discounts of over 50 per cent below the price of regular full-fare economy-class tickets for such trips.

34. Another large group of United Nations travellers consists of staff members assigned to United Nations peace-keeping or political missions in the field. Most of these assignments are for a duration of six months or longer. Since the actual return dates of the concerned staff members is not usually known in advance, and most discounted airfares have a maximum validity of three months, the majority of travellers on mission assignments are provided with one-way tickets. Discounted airfares are generally not available for one-way travel. The resulting price difference between the two classes of service is minimal.

35. Bearing in mind the types of most tickets purchased by the United Nations, the Secretariat has made every effort to negotiate with air carriers in order to obtain reduced airfares for frequently-travelled destinations to which regular discounted fares do not apply. As an example, in the case of the movement of staff members to the United Nations Observer Mission in South Africa, negotiations with several airlines reduced the airfares for one-way tickets to that destination by over 16 per cent. These savings were over and above those obtained through the agreements currently in place at Headquarters with some 24 airlines which provide significant incentive payments to the United Nations when using these carriers. Such incentive payments are credited as miscellaneous income to the regular budget.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

36. While the data on organizations of the United Nations system would appear to provide some justification for an improvement in the standards of accommodation for air travel applicable within the United Nations, there does not seem to be a sufficiently strong case for such a recommendation at this

time, particularly since the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (Personnel and General Administrative Questions) is also seized with the matter of arriving at a system-wide common standard of accommodation. Furthermore, given the problems inherent in the comparison of travel provisions of Member States with those of the United Nations, it would be difficult to make any recommendation for a revision in the current travel provisions of the Organization on this basis. Accordingly, the Secretary-General does not wish, at this juncture, to recommend any revision of the current standards of accommodation for air travel of staff members of the United Nations.

37. It should also be noted that, according to article 11 (b) of the Statute of the International Civil Service Commission, "the Commission shall establish ... rates of allowances and benefits, other than pensions and those referred to in article 10 (c), the conditions of entitlements thereto and standards of travel". Though the Commission has never conducted a substantive review of this subject under its authority, the General Assembly might wish to refer the question of standards of travel of staff members of the United Nations common system to the International Civil Service Commission for further consideration.

Annex I

Evolution of rules governing standards of accommodation for travel by air by staff members of the United Nations

1. Transportation by air was established in early 1958 as the standard mode of travel of United Nations staff members travelling in an official capacity. The class of accommodation for travel on official business at the time was first class for all staff. For home-leave travel, staff members at the D-1 level and above were entitled to first class on all air routes. Staff members at lower levels were entitled to tourist class for journeys scheduled to take less than 16 hours and to first class on air journeys scheduled to take 16 hours or longer.

2. In mid-1961 the travel entitlements were changed to provide first class to all staff members regardless of grade or level for travel on official business of a duration of nine hours or more. For such journeys of less than nine hours duration, staff at the P-5 level and above were entitled to first-class accommodation while staff at lower levels were provided with economy-class accommodation. The rules promulgated gave heads of offices considerable discretionary authority to upgrade travellers from economy to first class.

3. Early in 1963 the standards of travel by air were changed as follows:

(a) Under-secretaries-general and officials of equivalent level: first class for all types of travel;

(b) Staff at levels D-2 and D-1: first class for travel on official business;

(c) Staff at levels D-2 and below: economy or tourist class for travel on initial appointment, change of official duty station, extended mission assignment, separation from service or home leave.

4. It is noted that with this change in travel standards a distinction was made for the first time between (a) official-business travel and (b) all other travel.

5. Effective January 1966, standards of travel by air were reduced to economy or tourist class for all staff members. The Secretary-General was authorized to allow a higher standard when, in his opinion, this was in the best interest of the United Nations.

6. One year later, this ruling was modified to provide first-class travel to under-secretaries-general and officials of equivalent level for all types of travel and also for staff at the D-2 level when travelling on official business. Staff members at the D-2 level were provided with economy- or tourist-class accommodation when travelling by air for purposes other than official business (such as initial appointment, change of official duty station, extended mission assignment, separation from service or home leave). Staff members at the D-1 level and below remained entitled to economy or tourist class for all types of travel.

7. General Assembly resolution 3198 (XXVIII) adopted on 18 December 1973 provided that staff members, regardless of the category of travel, would be entitled to economy class only. The resolution made an exception for the Secretary-General, under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general, but did not specify the higher class of accommodation applicable to those senior officials. Provision was made in the resolution for the Secretary-General to allow first-class travel, at his discretion, when special circumstances so warranted.

8. On 21 December 1977, the General Assembly adopted resolution 32/198, which stated that air travel would be limited to the least costly airfare structure regularly available for all staff members. An exception was made for under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general who would be entitled to first class for all travel involving a flying time of over nine hours (except for education grant travel of dependents). The Secretary-General was authorized to exercise his discretion in making exceptions in most exigent circumstances to allow first-class travel on a case-by-case basis.

9. General Assembly resolution 35/217 of 17 December 1980 extended to the Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation, in addition to the Secretary-General, the entitlement to first-class accommodation whenever travelling by air. All other provisions remained unchanged.

10. In mid-1983, the standards of accommodation for air travel for under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general were changed to provide accommodation at the class immediately below first class for flights of a duration of less than nine hours. For flights in excess of nine hours the entitlement of these staff members remained unchanged at the first-class level. When designated to represent the Secretary-General on ceremonial occasions or to undertake missions in the exercise of his good offices under the Charter of the United Nations or relevant resolutions of the General Assembly or the Security Council, these staff members would be provided with first-class travel, irrespective of the flying time. For home-leave and family-visit travel, these staff members and their eligible family members would be provided with accommodation in the class immediately below first class, irrespective of the duration of a particular flight.

11. Staff members below the assistant secretary-general level and, where applicable, their eligible family members, were provided accommodation at the class immediately below first class for travel on official business, appointment, transfer or separation from service when the duration of a particular flight exceeded nine hours. For flights under nine hours duration, these staff members were provided with transportation at the least costly airfare structure regularly available, or its equivalent. For home-leave and family-visit travel, these staff members and their eligible family members were provided transportation at the least costly airfare structure regularly available or its equivalent, regardless of the duration of the travel.

12. For all education-grant travel, the eligible dependents of all staff members were provided, as before, with air transportation by the least costly airfare structure regularly available or its equivalent.

13. With effect from 1 January 1988, travel standards were amended to provide under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general and, where applicable, their eligible family members with travel accommodation in the class immediately below first class for travel on official business, on appointment, transfer or separation, home leave and family visit, irrespective of the duration of a particular flight. The Secretary-General's discretionary authority to upgrade travel to first class remained unchanged.

14. The standards of accommodation for air travel remained unchanged for staff members below the assistant secretary-general level, their eligible family members and for education-grant travel.

15. The standards of accommodation for air travel which went into effect on 1 January 1988, and which were summarized in ST/AI/249/Rev.3, dated 29 March 1989, remain in force.

Annex II

Standards of accommodation for air travel undertaken by United Nations system senior staff from outside the United Nations Secretariat (equivalent of under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general)

Standard of accommodation	Number of organizations to which it applies
First class except for journeys within a particular region of a duration of less than 4 hours or for journeys within Europe and the Mediterranean area	1
First class except on flights within Europe and the Mediterranean area, which are in business class	1
First class for the Deputy Director-General and business class for the assistant director-generals, regardless of duration of flight	1
First class, except for travel within Europe, which is in business class	1
First class, no restrictions mentioned	1
First class if flight exceeds 9 hours, otherwise business class	1
First class if travel exceeds 9 hours, otherwise economy class	1
Business class to all destinations except on flights to New York	1
Business class irrespective of duration of travel*	5
Business class if duration of travel exceeds 6 hours, otherwise economy class	1
Business class if duration of travel exceeds 5 hours, otherwise economy class	1

* Currently also applicable to the United Nations.

Annex III

Standards of accommodation for air travel undertaken by United Nations system staff from outside the United Nations Secretariat at level D-2 and below

Standard of accommodation	Number of organizations to which it applies
Business class on all flights regardless of duration of flight	2
Business class if travel time exceeds 8 hours and limited to missions of short durations (not exceeding three days)	1
Business class if travel time exceeds 6 hours, otherwise economy class	1
Business class if travel time exceeds 5 hours, otherwise economy class	3
For staff members at the D-1 level and below, business class if travel time exceeds 5 hours, otherwise economy; for staff at D-2 level, first class except for travel within Europe, which is authorized in business class	1
Business class for travel exceeding 2 1/2 hours; economy class for travel within Europe and to destinations within 2 1/2 hours of agency headquarters	1
Business class to all destinations except New York	1
Least costly air fare structure, except for flights over 9 hours in duration, which are in business class*	4
Economy class regardless of duration of flight	1

* Currently also applicable to the United Nations.

Annex IV

Standards of accommodation for air travel undertaken by officials of Member States

Note: This summary is based on an analysis of completed questionnaires received in 1992 from 72 permanent missions to the United Nations. Part A of the summary covers 45 Member States which provide different standards of accommodation for air travel to their government officials, dependant upon the position or grade level of the traveller. Part B covers 17 Member States that have established one set of travel standards applicable to all government officials, irrespective of the position or grade level of the particular traveller. Ten of the questionnaires received were incomplete or for other reasons could not be included in the analysis.

Part A

Standards based on position/grade level of the traveller

Standard of accommodation	Number of Member States to which it applies
Senior officials: first class; other officials: business class (duration of the particular flight is not a determining factor)	5
Senior officials: first class if the duration exceeds 2 1/2 hours, business class if less than 2 1/2 hours; other officials: business class if the duration exceeds 2 1/2 hours, otherwise economy class	1
Most senior officials: first class; intermediate officials: business class; other officials: economy class (duration of the particular flight is not a determining factor)	6
Senior officials: first class or business class, irrespective of the duration of a particular flight; other officials: business class for transatlantic flights or travel in excess of 6 hours, otherwise economy class	2
Senior officials: first class; other officials: economy class (duration of travel is not a determining factor)	21
Senior officials: business class irrespective of duration; other officials: business class if travel exceeds 9 hours, otherwise economy class	1
Senior officials: business class; other officials: economy class (duration of travel is not a determining factor)	9

Part B

Standards applicable to all travellers regardless of position or grade level

Standard of accommodation	Number of Member States to which it applies
Business class irrespective of the duration of the flight	4
Business class for flights of a duration of 4 hours or more	1
Business class for flights of a duration of 7 hours or more	1
Business class for flights of a duration of 8 hours or more	1
Economy class irrespective of the duration of the flight	10

Annex V

Summaries of responses to 1994 questionnaires

Standard of accommodation	Member State
First class for ministers and higher-ranking officials on official business, all others travel economy class, "occasionally upgraded to business class"; transfers to new assignments: first class for ministers and higher-ranking officials and business class for all others; home-leave travel: first class for ambassadors, business class for all others. The duration of flights is not mentioned as a factor in authorizing upgrades to a higher class of service	A
All levels of staff urged to travel by the least expensive means; authority to decide on the class of service is delegated to programme managers and heads of divisions, with the same procedure applied to home-leave travel. Note: This Member State stated in its responses to the earlier questionnaire that all officials were provided with business-class accommodation irrespective of the duration or purpose of a particular travel	B
Economy class established as the basic standard for government employees; various officials and some conditions allow for first- and business-class accommodations, but the only such condition indicated was for flights with a duration of over 14 hours	C